DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 573 CS 509 361

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TITLE Technopoly, Media Monopolies and Curriculum.
PUB DATE Nov 95
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (81st, San Antonio, TX, November 18-21, 1995).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Change; Futures (of Society); *Mass Media Effects; *Mass Media Role; Popular Culture; Technological Advancement; *Technology
IDENTIFIERS Information Society; *Postman (Neil); *Technology Integration

ABSTRACT

Neil Postman describes the United States in the late 20th century as the only "technopoly" (a society that has totally surrendered to technology, information, and science) in the world, and he asks educators to resist technopoly by changing curriculum. In his book "Technopoly," Postman proposes that cultures may be classified into 3 types: traditional, technocracies, and technopolies. What is most valued in a technopoly is information, not only data and facts but all types of communication. In a technopoly, methods of science are applied to mass media and, according to Postman, determine the way people perceive reality. In the global marketplace of mass media, the United States entertainment industry dominates as an information sender. Personal experience indicates that mass media have an effect on people's perception of life in the United States that has a subtle influence on face-to-face communication. Studies consistently indicate that continued use of information obtained through the mass media, particularly television and film, influences perceptions. Postman states that in the evolution to a technopoly social institutions, church, family, government, no longer control information. Postman suggests that everyone needs to resist technopoly and that curriculum in schools should change to help people resist. Educators should ask and seek answers to important questions about the kind of society desired, how to get there, and what role the mass media would have in an ideal community. (Contains 10 references.) (RS)

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Technopoly, Media Monopolies and Curriculum

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Introduction

Popular critics of the mass media often are concerned with the negative impact of mass media technology on culture. According to Neil Postman (1992) culture has surrendered to technology. He believes the uncontrolled growth of technology "destroys the vital sources of our humanity" and creates a culture without moral foundation (p. xii). He contends technology undermines certain fundamental processes and human relations that make life worth living. Although he calls it both a friend and enemy, his book, Technopoly, describes when, how, and why technology became a dangerous enemy of culture, that is when society became a technopoly.

A technopoly is a society that has totally surrendered to technology, information, and science. Perception is shaped and values communicated through media monopolies rather than church, family or state. There are no moral underpinnings that guide action, subjective forms of belief are not valued, and information exists for information's sake.

Postman describes the United States in the late 20th century as the only technopoly in the world. He asks educators to resist technopoly by changing curriculum. Blaming the media for societal problems is not new and neither is the call to change curriculum to solve problems. But perhaps Postman provides a perspective that may help to broaden our thinking about the role of the media in our society and how we integrate our understanding about the central role of mass communication into

curriculum. Should we resist as Postman suggests? What does it mean to resist technopoly? Should education and curriculum change be at the heart of this resistance?

The focus of this essay is to provide an overview of Postman's description of a technopoly and to focus on three fundamental characteristics of a technopoly that apply to global mass communication. These characteristics are: the central place of information, the perception of reality through technology, and the control of information. Problems caused by global media technology will be discussed in relation to their impact on communication, culture and curriculum.

Evolution to Technopoly

Neil Postman proposes in Technopoly that cultures may be classified into three types: traditional, technocracies, and technopolies. All of these cultures exist in the world today, but the United States is the only technopoly.

In the first stage, cultures are tool using and there is a relationship between tools and ideology. Postman says that tools were not intruders on culture but integrated into culture. The tools, broadly interpreted, were invented to solve specific problems in culture, for example, spears and windmills. Tools also serve as symbols; such as cathedrals. Beliefs, religious or otherwise, directed the invention of tools and controlled their uses. Small-scale skilled labor produced goods. Land was valuable.

The next development in culture was technocracy. This began

around the eighteenth century in England. In this culture, there is a separation of moral and intellectual values. Large scale impersonal market production produces goods. Money replaces land as the highest valued commodity. Knowledge is power. Society is loosely controlled by social custom and religious tradition. Man is driven by the impulse to invent. If something can be invented, it should be invented. Technocracy gave us the idea of progress. It did not totality destroy the symbolic and social traditions, but it did subordinate them. In this culture, both the traditional and the technological viewpoints exist side by side.

The third stage of cultural development is technopoly. The United States reached this stage in the twentieth century based on the successes of the nineteenth century capitalists. Convenience, comfort and speed are valued. Old sources of belief (church, school, family) are diminished.

The Central Place of Information

What is most valued in a technopoly is information, not only data and facts but all types of communication. Unlike the traditional culture, the connection between information and purpose is gone. There are no moral underpinnings and an overwhelming glut of information. No social institutions exist to control information. A technopoly ignores information that is inefficient, but information exists for information's sake rather than for usefulness of purpose. Information is in the hands of experts who have complete faith in science. The subjective forms

of knowledge have no official status, methods of science are applied to human behavior, information is important independent of its value to society.

Postman describes the effect of a technopoly on a key area that affects communication: perception. He says that in a technopoly, technologies create the ways people perceive reality and limit creative thought. How does mass communication fit in a technopoly that values information? Postman does not specifically discuss mass communication, but communication is how information is shared and in the twentieth century the means used in a global environment is highly dependent on mass communication systems.

Mass Communication and Perception

Communication is the transmission of information and is based on experience. In a technopoly, as Postman suggests, methods of science have been applied to it. Technologies, such as radio, TV, and film, give us information, topics to discuss, and in Postman's words, direct our thought. The recent broadcast of the OJ Simpson trial to a world wide audience seems to confirm this. The value in the coverage was not in the content or that the world was interested, but in the fact that it was possible to transmit this information around the world, therefore it was transmitted and other cultures made evaluations of our justice system based on their perceptions of this trial coverage.

The idea of the influence of technology on perception is not new. McLuhan and Innes discussed this same idea in relation to

differences in the culture and societies of print communication and oral communication. McLuhan (1964) applied a social theory of determinism to all media. This theory, first elaborated by Harold Innes, states that human institutions are determined by the predominant media of communication. This theory assumes a causal relationship between the dominant media of society and the whole psychological and social complex. One of the basic principles is that communication media extend or bias perception. Postman seems to be saying the same thing. In a twentieth century technopoly, the use of mass communications plays a critical role in culture because they transmit information and determine the way people perceive reality.

Information Usefulness

The value of the availability of information has been a concern among intellectuals since the beginning of the use electronic means of communication. In Walden (originally published in 1854), Thoreau explains the dilemma:

> Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, . . . We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate (p. 144).

Today, it is not only the usefulness of information for Maine and Texas we are considering but for nations on every continent.

Information to the World

In the global marketplace of mass media, the United States

entertainment industry dominates as an information sender and appears to be saying a lot to audiences around the world. What are they saying? Violence is one message being sent.

George Gerbner discusses, in The Killing Screens, the dominance of violence in the content of American mass media and states that it is economic gain, not information for information's sake that prevails. Violence is part of the information content not because people want it, but because it is cheap to produce and easily sold in a global market place. This provides us with an explanation for one type of content (violence) but does not answer the question implied by Postman: does this information, independent of moral underpinnings and connection to a culture, affect perception in such a way as to create perceptions of reality that affect communication among international audiences?

Personal Experiences

My personal experience indicates that mass media has some effect on people's perception of life in the United States that has a subtle influence on face to face communication and, as Postman suggests, it seems to direct the topics of conversation. In Buenos Aires last summer, I observed 65 cable television channels; about one third from the U.S. and in English. These channels included TNT, Cartoon Network, CNN, C-Span, MTV, USA. International programs were also broadcast from Mexico, Spain, Brazil, Chile, France, and Germany. A former student of mine, an Argentine who now lives in Buenos Aires, commented that although

people watch American comedy shows, they don't "get it" because they don't understand American culture. The baseball World Series was carried live although baseball is not generally played or understood there. However, American programs are not only carried but watched.

In doing a survey of student perception of the United States, another Argentine student, assisting me was asked if he was part of the capitalist American system. In a radio interview in San Juan located in western Argentina near the Chile border, I was asked why Americans love violence.

In 1990, in an East African village, I was asked what kind of gun I carried and when I said I didn't and I didn't know anyone who did, my comment was met with disbelief. Further, I was warned I should not stay out after dark in the U.S. because I would get raped. Despite the remote location, American film and television are not unknown.

Studies of Social Perception

Studies consistently indicate that continued use of information obtained through the mass media, particularly television and film, influences perceptions. Gerbner's (1986) cultivation and mainstreaming hypotheses are based on the assumption that television presents a distorted view of reality which is internalized and accepted by heavy television viewers. Gerbner and his colleagues have done research which indicates those who watch a considerable amount of television think the world a more violent place than it really is.

Studies of international perceptions of Americans also indicate an influence by television. For example, frequency of viewing Dallas and Dynasty in Taiwan and Mexico was related to the stereotyping of Americans as aggressive, cruel, dishonest and pleasure loving (Tan, Simpson & Li, 1986). A study of stereotypes of Americans in Thailand characterized Americans as pleasure-loving, athletic, individualistic, sensual, and efficient (Tan and Suarchavarat, 1988). Two factors seemed to influence these perceptions: the pervasiveness of television in the community as well as the lack of information from other sources about Americans. A more recent study found not only television viewing to influence perceptions about Americans but also interpersonal communication with parents and others (El-Koussa & Elasmar, 1995).

So it seems there is evidence that obtaining information through the technology of mass media influences perceptions of reality and therefore influences face to face communication. This substantiates an aspect of Postman's description of a technopoly, but is this a problem? A more relevant problem may be the source of the information.

Control of Information by Media Monopolies

Postman states that in the evolution to a technopoly social institutions, church, family, government, no longer control information. Computer access to a wide variety of people and groups using the Internet seem to substantiate this claim. There is no institution that regulates the flow of information over the

Internet. However, some users have taken it upon themselves to censor the content of the information. Censorship of the Internet is an important issue not only in the U.S. but also world wide. Closed societies like Saudi Arabia have concerns over the influence and availability of pornography and other types of information that is strictly regulated in their country. It is a cultural dilemma and not unlike the use of satellite and bootlegged video tapes that provided information that contributed to the decline of the Soviet influence in Eastern Europe.

Another concern related to control is the domination of large communication companies. This trend toward consolidation has been predicted for a long time. Ben Bagdikian, former journalism school dean and Washington Post editor, in his book, The Media Monopoly (1992), documented the negative impact of fifty corporations dominating U.S. media. His book predicted that mergers would reduce that number to about six. At his last count fewer than twenty corporations in America had majority control of mass media industries and these same companies dominate the global media companies. Examples are found in the announced mergers of Disney/ABC and Turner Broadcasting/Times-Warner. Postman says no social institutions control the information, but what about corporate control? When corporations whose goal is profit, control information, what effect does that have on all of us; not only in economic terms but in development of a world wide culture based on perceptions received from this medium?

The Disney film, Pochahontas, was simultaneously released to audiences world wide. In most of the world, this story has no relevance to local history or culture. Yet, it is successful. Perhaps the problem in the development of a world wide culture dominated by perceptions and information from North America is that we are losing the rich cultures and variety of the world. The more one source takes over the control of information the more diversity is lost and the problem is in the loss of the richness of the human experience. We communicate more and more alike in a world view without appreciation for the subjective experience of culture. We rely on that which makes a profit and is possible to do. As Postman suggests, the subjective experience has no place in a technopoly and, in that regard, cultures may be in the process of surrendering to technology.

Resistance Through Curriculum?

Postman says his role as social critic is not to offer solutions to save culture. His restatements of Thoreau's concern about information and of McLuhan's theory of media determinism offers little in the way of answers. He does suggest that we all need to resist technopoly and that curriculum in schools should change to help people resist. But do we know what to resist and what to add or change in mass communication curriculum?

Fundamental questions remain regarding the role of mass media technologies in a world wide culture. Casmir (1992) suggests that "if media technology can become such a dominating force, it behooves us to find out if political, cultural and

social systems are changed by the use of technology (and) science... . ...As of now, we have insufficient understanding of the control media technology exerts" (p. 254). Our challenge is not to resist, but to find out the influence mass media technology have on international communication and culture. Mass media are not the only danger to culture. For example, we must also consider the impact on culture from trade and tourism. Then we can make informed decisions about changes in curriculum.

An other area of inquiry is the development of a new communication environment. There is no longer a single medium that dominates. Instead many media are converging into a single "mega media" where all the mass communication technologies are seamless and transparent. Distinction among them are minimal and difficult to observe. Until we know the possible effects of convergence, resistance seems unfounded.

Educators should ask and seek answers to important questions about the kind of society we want and how we get there. What role do the mass media have in an ideal community? Once we have answers to that question, then we can build curriculum to achieve what we seek and to resist what is irrelevant.

Finally, there is some question regarding the uniqueness of cultural change caused by mass communication. A final comment is offered from a cynical colleague. He says that we have been on the path to a totally homogenized world since the invention of printing, perhaps since the development of writing itself. What we are observing now is simply more steps along a path toward that condition, albeit with perhaps some increase in pace.

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